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AUTHOR Yerkes, Diane M.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The cohort concept has recently been reconsidered in response to pressures for reform in school-leadership preparation programs. A cohort is defined as a group of students who engage in a program of studies together. Surveys sent to 37 institutions across the United States that use cohort models in their administrator-preparation courses elicited 23 returns. Ninety-six percent reported that they had fully implemented the cohort concept in their programs. Many of the responding institutions used instructional strategies that encouraged the development of student responsibility for learning the development of common purpose. Faculty had developed varied activities to stimulate meaningful social interaction. Most of the cohort programs used a variety of self-assessment and diagnostic inventories and emphasized individual and group development. In anecdotal reports, students report a sense of belonging, new opportunities for collaboration and networking, a sense of professional confidence, and improved reflective-thinking abilities. Faculty reactions are mixed; however, some faculty report that teaching cohorts provides them with opportunities for collaboration with colleagues, new instructional techniques, closer student-faculty relationships, and ultimately improved academic and professional guidance for students. (Contains 17 references.) (LMI)

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Using Cohorts in the Development of Educational Leaders

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Diane M. Yerkes
School of Education and Human Development
California State University at Fresno

Margaret R. Basom
Unit of Educational Leadership
University of Wyoming

Cynthia Norris
Department of Educational Leadership
University of Houston

Bruce Barnett
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
University of Northern Colorado

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D. Yerkes

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Abstract

Using Cohorts in the Development of Educational Leaders

The cohort concept, after lying nearly dormant for several years, began recently to be reconsidered in response to pressures for reform in school leadership preparation programs. Cohort, which may be very simply defined as a group, is defined more narrowly in higher education to be a group of students who engage in a program of studies together (Yerkes et al., 1994).

Creating cohorts can be far more than a way to organize students and to encourage supportive professional relationships. While many education administration preparation programs throughout the country seem to be investigating and adopting the cohort model in their preparation programs, the issues of how cohorts are presently being used and whether there are uses in the model which extend beyond the convenience of selecting and scheduling students or the delivery of a coherent, integrated curriculum (Weise, 1992) are not clear. This paper addresses the makings of a cohort, presents findings from several universities on the use of cohorts in the preparation of school leaders and describes instructional strategies used in those cohorts. Several issues facing the usage of cohorts are also addressed.

The cohort concept, after lying nearly dormant for several years, began recently to be reconsidered in response to pressures for reform in school leadership preparation programs. A cohort, which may be very simply defined as a group, is defined more narrowly in higher education as a group of students who engage in a program of studies together and generally share a common set of classes and experiences. Some educators have enhanced that definition to include membership selection, collaborative work, goal orientation, social interaction, and support among a group of students who are enrolled in a program of studies together (Merino, Muse, and Wright, 1994). Implicit in the emerging definitions of cohorts are characteristics such as a supportive learning environment, independent and interdependent learning opportunities, coherence, networking, the building of professional connections, and the development of a sense of group purpose based on common interests (Yerkes et al., 1994b).

Groups of people who happen to share the same space, time, professors, and assignments and who enjoy each other's company for a year or two are not, however, necessarily cohorts. Effective groups work together, provide assistance to each other, find success in their efforts, while at the same time, developing each individual's talents. Such learning groups in which students work together over a period of time, are good examples of effective cohorts.

Many education administration preparation programs throughout the country seem to be investigating and adopting the cohort model in their preparation programs. Prior to changing practices in the profession, however, it might be prudent for faculty to investigate several issues. The issues of how cohorts are presently being used and whether there are uses in the cohort model which extend beyond the convenience of selecting and scheduling students, or the delivery of a coherent, integrated curriculum (Weise,1992) should all be addressed. Expectations for today's schools--characterized by shared leadership, communities of learners, and visionary leadership--may provide opportunities to consider additional ways that cohorts can offer experiences to enhance student preparation for leadership positions (Yerkes et al., 1994b).

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Past Practices with Cohorts

Descriptions of cohorts, their organizational patterns and instructional strategies are appearing more regularly in the literature on education administration (Achilles, 1994; Cordeiro et al., 1993; Milstein and Associates, 1993). Some facilitators and group members have begun to report how cohort structures and activities affect students, faculty, and programs (Merino et al.,1994; Yerkes, Norris, Basom, and Barnett,1994a; Barnett and Muse, 1993; Hill, 1992). While interest in understanding and assessing the value of cohorts is accelerating, limited systematic research, as yet, focuses on cohorts. Researchers from four universities which incorporate cohorts are in the midst of studying the cohort phenomenon. After studying cohort definitions; researching cohort uses in various fields (medicine, law, psychology, education); reviewing group dynamics and adult learning literature; and considering the role of transformational leadership in today's schools, this research group is presently approaching the cohort from several other perspectives. These include: 1) significant themes--common purpose, social interaction, and individual and group development--from the literature on groups which seem to characterize cohorts; 2) historical uses of cohorts in education; 3) the current state of cohort use in administrator preparation programs, including structural considerations, cohort development and the impact of cohorts; and 4) the potential links among the themes of effective groups, the cohort, and the development of transformational leaders who will foster the building of community in schools (Yerkes et al., 1994b).

This paper addresses the makings of a cohort, presents a status report of findings from several universities on the use of cohorts in the preparation of educational leaders, and describes instructional strategies used in those cohorts. Several challenges facing faculty, students and programs surrounding the usage of cohorts are also addressed.

Cohorts as Groups

A brief examination of the factors that combine to characterize a well-functioning group may be useful in the study of cohorts. Groups are two or more interdependent individuals who

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influence each other through their social interaction (Forsyth, 1990). The term is further defined as two or more individuals who interact, are interdependent, share common norms, and pursue individual as well as group goals (Johnson and Johnson,1987). Interdependence, the "hallmark of a group", (Forsyth, 1990, p. 9) is clearly a central focus in group effectiveness. Strong interdependence among group members encourages interaction which results in high emotional involvement in learning (Johnson and Johnson,1987). The literature on group development suggests that interdependence results when group members: (1) have a common purpose, (2) influence each other through social interaction, and (3) are allowed to pursue individual and group learning opportunities (Brilhart and Galanes, 1992; Forsyth, 1990; Johnson and Johnson, 1987; Napier and Gershenfeld, 1985; Zander, 1982).

The three aforementioned characteristics of effective learning groups are seen as prerequisites for the development of successful cohorts. As such, those prerequisites are of particular importance to faculty in preparation programs which use a cohort concept. An effective cohort generally will not develop on its own. Careful planning and continued attention by a skilled facilitator is necessary in order to assure the three key characteristics of groups are present.

Status Report

In an effort to understand current uses of various structural elements of cohorts, surveys were sent to 37 institutions around the United States that prepare school leaders using cohort models. All regions of the United States were represented. The survey was developed to gather information relating to the characteristics of existing cohorts as well as to ascertain the presence of effective learning groups characteristics found in the literature. Questions focused on group size, academic preparation level, and frequency and duration of meeting times. Evidence of student interaction, involvement, and independent learning were determined through several open ended questions. Institutions were also asked to provide a list of group activities as well as diagnostic/prescriptive inventories used with students.

Descriptive data collected centered on the structures of

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cohorts--level of use, group size, academic level, cohort type, and duration and frequency of meetings-- and the strategies, activities, and inventories incorporated which may relate to the three key features of effective groups. The latter results are incorporated into sections further describing those features of effective groups in an effort to illustrate how cohort practices in use today may reflect the significant characteristics of effective groups: common purpose, social interaction, and individual and group development.

Of the 37 surveys sent out, 23 were returned. A review of the survey results yields fairly specific information about the structural elements and group strategies and activities incorporated in 23 preparation programs across the United States today that reported using cohorts.

Structural Issues

Faculty members were asked to share their perspectives regarding the implementation level of cohort use in their program. All the institutions in the study were indeed engaged in incorporating cohorts in their programs. Four percent reported being at an awareness level while 96% reported fully implementing the cohort concept in their programs. None of the respondents felt that they were involved at a trial basis level.

Incorporation of cohorts into administrative preparation and leadership development programs was more common at the master's degree/credential/certificate level with 96%, of programs reporting use of cohorts while 70% reported using cohorts at the doctoral level.

Cohorts have been defined as being of three basic types : 1) closed or pure - where students take all of their coursework together in a prearranged sequence; 2) open or mixed - in which students enroll in a core set of classes together and take additional coursework to meet their own needs; and 3) fluid or course-by-course - in which students may join the cohort at different times rather than at only one entry point (Parks, 1994; Barnett and Muse, 1993). One-fourth of the institutions reported using more than one type of cohort: the types used in master's programs sometimes differed from those used in the same institution's doctoral program. Over 70% of the respondents reported using closed cohorts; over 60% indicated the use of open cohorts while only 13% used fluid cohort

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structures. Closed and open cohorts were certainly the most commonly used. Fluid cohorts are sometimes looked on as little more than a fairly traditional method of scheduling students and may not exemplify a true cohort. Since the group development literature points to the importance of trust, interdependence, and interaction, it is not surprising that institutions prefer closed models.

Group Characteristics

Common Purpose- Background

Groups become interdependent when they have a common purpose. Groups gain cohesion to the extent that their purpose is clear and acted upon. Clarity of purpose is achieved when group members understand how the group will attain its goals (Larson and LaFasto, 1989). Group accomplishments help propel members toward clarifying and attaining their goals. While a group's purpose may shift as plans, wishes, and goals of group members change, the purpose needs to remain constant; the purpose must be "a promise among people that they will try to reach a given state of affairs through collaborative efforts" (Zander, 1985, p. 34). When the purpose is clear, the group will have a greater probability of success or effectiveness (Larson and LaFasto, 1989). If the group's activities necessitate interactions and interdependence, participants develop a greater sense of purpose (Zander, 1985).

Once initial expectations for group participation are made clear, it becomes the faculty member's role to help students in further defining their purpose. Within cohorts in educational leadership preparation programs, several strategies for developing common purpose may be used. Members could be permitted to set group goals and determine activities which will best help them meet the goals. Members could be allowed to determine the criteria for evaluating their success, including the joint determination of grades. Students' participation in designing or redesigning courses will increase the sense of ownership in the group's purpose. Networking with group members and building present and future professional relationships will enhance regional or cross-district discussion of ideas and help decrease the isolation of the school administrator. Individual learning plans, action research projects, case studies, simulations, and contracts or projects with school districts can also

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assist members of the cohort in clarifying their individual and collective purpose. By allowing students more ownership in the components of their program, faculty roles become less directive. Students begin to feel that they "own" their program. Involvement promotes commitment. As this happens, the group develops a sense of common purpose and begins to believe in and work toward "a cause beyond oneself" (Glickman, 1990, p. 18).

Common Purpose-Results

Many of the responding institutions used instructional strategies that encouraged the development of student responsibility for their own learning and the development of common purpose. All programs reported that faculty members perceived their role as that of facilitator, taking a less directive teaching approach. Over 90% of the programs required students to keep reflective journals. Over 80% of responding institutions reported using case studies and team teaching. The survey identified 11 strategies that support the development of common purpose. Those include strategies like team building, problem based learning, journals, case studies and instructor as facilitator. The responding programs reported using anywhere from 3 to 11 of them. Over 90%, of the institutions reported incorporating six or more of the instructional strategies suggested. Several faculty members indicated using strategies in addition to those included on the survey such as book discussions with authors; triad meetings among student, site supervisor, and university supervisor; the development of "problem" projects; and small group activities. Given the above, the data would suggest that instructors in programs with cohorts tend to incorporate a variety of instructional strategies that support the development of group purpose, are more facilitative than directive, and encourage students to assume more responsibility for their own learning.

Social Interaction-Background.

The literature on adult development and adult learning is particularly relevant to a discussion of cohort development. Studies have shown that adults learn best when they direct their own learning, influence the decision-making process, emphasize relevant problems of practice, tap their own considerable experiential backgrounds, and build strong relationships with peers (Merriam and

Caffarella, 1991). These strong relationships constitute a second important factor that characterizes effective learning groups.

People working in groups learn best as they actively participate and contribute to the group. Active involvement is particularly important as adults participate in groups (Merriam and Caffarella, 1991). Social interactions can also influence the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of others in the group. The instructor, as well as group members, often will profit from new learning from group members who feel free to express opinions and beliefs in a trusting atmosphere. Self esteem will also be enhanced through the development of a support network which includes mutual understanding and respect.

Learning climates where social interaction is encouraged is a requirement for growth. An authoritarian tone on the part of the instructor can stifle interaction; a supportive climate of respect, openness, and acceptance can facilitate quality interaction (Forsyth, 1990). An important part of the facilitator's responsibility is to allow group members to feel important and worthwhile, have a sense of belongingness, and be accepted by others in the group (Merriam and Caffarella, 1991).

Trusting relationships must be cultivated in the early stages of group development. Instructors can help this process through facilitating student acquaintances. Preliminary interaction activities among students often allow them to share their values, beliefs, and expectations for themselves as group members. Coming to know each other's areas of expertise and histories--professional as well as personal--provides opportunities for discovering common, and sometimes divergent, interests as well as offering the chance to learn from those whose backgrounds and experiences are different from one's own (Yerkes et al., 1994).

Social Interaction-Results

Responses to the survey indicate that program faculty have developed varied initial activities to stimulate meaningful social interactions. These range from the fairly expensive and time-consuming residential retreat at the beginning of a program to a series of group activities throughout a program that may include participation in field trips and site visits, cultural excursions, professional meetings, and conferences. To develop a strong

foundation of trust upon which future social interactions can be built,some programs include the development of "life maps;" othersincorporate adventure/challenge programs, such as "ropes" courses. Many programs create opportunities for students to commute together, plan group meals, organize social and/or learning events with their facilitators, and to conduct celebrations on behalf of personal milestones, completion of classes, or graduation.

Survey respondents noted various group activities designed to increase social interaction in their programs. Some of those activities included problem-based learning projects, small group video production activities, mock interviews, and E-Mail interactions. Collaborative assignments and projects were among the most frequently mentioned group activities with 86% of responding institutions reporting some type of collaborative work. Over half the responding institutions reported using social events, seminars, workshops/symposia, and field excursions. One-third reported incorporating retreats and orientation sessions. Ropes courses, problem-based learning projects, and group tests were mentioned by smaller numbers. The following activities were each mentioned by one institution: training in group facilitation, administrative rounds, creation of mentor program, professional development plans, small-group studies on school-based problems, issue study groups, and committees to plan refreshments and activities.

Structural issues also play a big role in the development of social interaction among group members. Cohort size, duration of the cohort, the length of the program, and the arrangement of cohort meetings all play a significant role in influencing a group's social interaction. Cohorts in Danforth-sponsored programs had between 18-20 students (Cordeiro, et al., 1993). Nearly two-thirds of the respondents reported that their groups were in the 15- to 25-member range, while the other third reported having smaller groups. Respondents seem to prefer to limit the size to no more than 25 participants, but in times of tight budgets, numbers may be increasing. One institution reported cohorts of 38 while another reported a group of 45 members.

Duration and frequency of meetings varied considerably among programs. Most master's/credential/certificate programs lasted from four to six semesters with approximately half lasting four semesters. Doctoral cohorts range from two semesters to three

academic years. Most master's program cohorts meet once a week for an average of 4.5 hours. Nearly one third of the institutions reported conducting summer programs and/or including additional meeting time in summers as well as extra time spent on Saturdays or in week-day meetings.

Size of cohorts no doubt play an integral part in the quality of a group's social interactions, the development of group trust levels and the interdependence of the group. The data gathered to date, however, vary so widely as to be of limited value. The variety of configurations of meeting schedules could be helpful to those considering incorporating cohorts. Nearly half of the institutions conduct off-campus cohorts as well as those on campus. The survival of some graduate programs might depend on a program's willingness to develop a "portable" off campus program and a cohort configuration might be a valuable way of accomplishing that task. Further study in this area could be fruitful.

Data collected from the survey respondents indicate that programs incorporating cohorts are making efforts to encourage social interaction among group participants. If we agree that social interaction is an important component of human beings' genetic makeup (Brilhart and Galanes, 1992) and if we believe that interacting with each other strengthens group members' connections to each other, it may be said that encouraging such interaction could play a significant part not only in students' success in their graduate programs but perhaps in their future leadership roles as well. The isolation of the school principal is well documented; learning to work in a supportive way with colleagues could be a valuable asset to school administrators as they proceed through their careers. Administrators who can model collaborative and supportive behaviors for faculty could assist with teacher issues of isolation as well (Yerkes et al.,1994).

Individual and Group Development-Background

Cohort facilitators need to ensure that group processes assist the group in achieving its goals while not interfering with an individual member's ability to realize his/her potential. Opportunities for both individual learning and collective group development are essential if group members are to be become interdependent (Forsyth, 1990). Throughout the group experience,

individual members regularly need to balance (1) the realization of the group's purpose and (2) the achievement and satisfaction of individual personal goals (Johnson and Johnson, 1987).

Various instructional strategies lend themselves to the development of individual and group goals. Activities that nurture individual growth encourage self-evaluation, self-initiation, self-confidence, and risk taking and experimentation (Yerkes, et al., 1994). Writing in reflective journals and creating professional portfolios become critical components to stimulating self-initiation and self-evaluation. Risk taking and experimentation are encouraged when students participate in developing course goals and evaluation methods; work collaboratively on activities; present their projects, educational platforms, or findings to their colleagues; develop individual learning plans; and establish the norms under which the class operates (Yerkes et al., 1994).

When a climate of mutual support and respect is developed in which group members can influence the activities and topics of discussion, participate in decision-making, develop goals, and evaluate outcomes, the chances of the group's accomplishment of its goals are enhanced (Merriam and Caffarella, 1991). Through team building exercises, warm-up activities and interactive group work in and outside of class, interpersonal relationships in the early stages of the group's life are enhanced which help attend to a group's collective needs. These activities provide opportunities for members to get to know each other and work together. Group needs may also be determined and met through developing and sharing individual learning plans. Opportunities for networking and mutual learning are developed through collaborative projects and joint presentations; school and business site visits ; and interaction with a variety of practitioners. Lastly, collaborating on course outcomes, fieldwork, assignments and assessments empowers students and further helps to create collective ownership in program outcomes.

Individual and Group Development-Results.

Results from survey data indicate that a variety of self-assessment and diagnostic inventories are used in cohort programs. These instruments provide considerable information about skills, interests, and abilities of individuals. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is used in 68% of the programs. The National Association of

Secondary School Principals' Assessment Center (NASSP) or the National Association of Elementary School Principals' (NAESP) Administrative Diagnostic Inventory are used in slightly less than half of the programs. Twenty-six other inventories were reportedly used, most in only one program. Although there appears to be a lack of consistency in which instruments are used, all but four respondents reported using one or more diagnostic inventories. Assisting students to self-evaluate and to recognize and reflect on their abilities appears to be common to most programs.

All of the respondents indicated that collaborative projects and assignments were used in their programs. The keeping of reflective journals was reported in 91% of the programs. Eighty-two percent of the programs are using reflective seminars or sessions and 59% of the respondents indicated that their program made use of individual learning plans.

Individual and group development of cohorts appeared to be a focus in most programs and was achieved through a plethora of activities designed to encourage self-initiation, self-evaluation, and self-confidence. Less information was obtained on risk taking and experimentation but the researchers are hoping that those elements of individual and group learning may have been encouraged through individual and collaborative presentations and projects. Since varied activities which encourage group learning are apparent in the surveyed institutions, it would appear that reporting institutions are attending to the key characteristics and most of the elements of effective groups through providing systematic opportunities for both individuals and groups to learn and develop (Yerkes et al., 1994).

Reflections

Using cohorts in leadership preparation programs seems to be a current trend. While only a few of the 500 institutions of higher education preparing school administrators were using cohorts in 1988 (Merino, et. al., 1994), there is some indication that the numbers are increasing. Further research along the lines of this preliminary study would be in order.

Of the 23 institutions from across the United States who were respondents in this study, all are incorporating some form of

the cohort concept. Of those responding, the majority (95%) incorporated cohorts at the master's degree level. In recent years, professional meetings in the field of leadership are offering sessions on cohorts and those sessions usually draw a good audience. Questions and contributions at such meetings have varied from structural issues, such as ideal group size and optimal meeting schedules, to the design and delivery of curriculum, and best instructional strategies as well as impact on faculty involved with those programs.

While little research has focused on the development, use, and impact of cohorts, anecdotal data are beginning to emerge that illustrate the positive effect of cohorts on students, faculty, and programs. Students typically report a sense of belonging and social bonding, new opportunities to collaborate and network, a sense of professional confidence, and a strengthened ability to reflect on practice (Yerkes, et al.,1994b). Faculty reactions are somewhat mixed but more faculty tend to be reporting positive results of their work with cohorts. In particular, faculty indicate that teaching cohorts enables them to work more collaboratively with colleagues; encourages them to risk trying new instructional techniques; affords them an opportunity to develop closer faculty-student relationships; and, ultimately provides improved academic and professional guidance for students. As a result of working more closely with practitioners and students, curriculum reform may be significantly enhanced, making the program more relevant to the needs of today's school leaders.

Several challenges also emerge as a result of using cohorts. Some question the elitism of defining a program which better prepares school leaders yet restricts it to several 'groups' of students. There are many incidents of discomfort among faculty with regards to the new approaches in joint planning, teaching, and faculty-student relationships. The extensive time commitment required to work collaboratively has also been mentioned by some as an obstacle for implementation. However, the current literature, limited though it is, reports far more positive experiences than negative ones in the use of cohorts.

The researchers in this project believe using a cohort

approach is a topic worthy of practice and study. Further research into the influence of the cohort experience on students is very much needed. We have only begun to scratch the surface on potential benefits of this approach. If indeed those benefits are as substantial as the preliminary data suggest, it would behoove researchers to investigate the nature of the transfer of this concept. Do students who participate in preparation programs indeed become the different leader so drastically needed for the schools of the future? Do cohort members understand the power of the concept and can they transfer that learning to leadership practice? Will they build learning communities which mirror their own cohort experience? Many questions persist and there are few answers: the research team encourages others to join in the search for answers.

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